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A secluded two-mile stretch of Lake Michigan shoreline that has remained much the same since explorers saw it centuries ago could be opened as a public park.

The plan, being pursued by U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, would have the Navy transfer ownership of a narrow strip of lakefront in and adjacent to Highland Park to an environmental trust.

As proposed, a partnership of public and private interests would raise funds to preserve and restore the adjoining bluffs as the centerpiece of a public park featuring one of the few remaining stretches of original Lake Michigan shoreline.

Kirk announced the plans Monday in a news conference at Fort Sheridan, saying he didn't want the area to become a "Gold Coast north" of lakefront high rises. The Highland Park Republican lives in a newly developed part of Fort Sheridan.

The former military base was decommissioned in 1993 and gave rise to the Town of Fort Sheridan, an upscale community of new homes and former barracks renovated into townhouses and condos.

"It gives us the raw material to begin the restoration effort," Kirk said of the transfer of about two miles of shoreline, extending about 400 feet inland to include 60-foot-high bluffs facing the water.

On a clear day, the buildings in downtown Chicago to the south and the closed Zion nuclear plant to the north are visible. The bluffs and ravines that adjoin a narrow, rocky beach are home to eight species of endangered plants and are part of a flyway used by 5 million migratory songbirds.

Currently, the area is restricted to use by military personnel, although some residents of nearby communities walk the beach on occasion.

"What we're really saying is if we do this right, we'll find it more beautiful, doubly beautiful," said Joyce O'Keefe, associate director of the Openlands Project, a nonprofit organization that has secured more than 45,000 acres in northeastern Illinois.

O'Keefe said the area is the only major piece of lakefront property in Illinois with a ravine/bluff geography.

"People will be able to see an ecosystem they've never seen before," she said.

To the north, the Lake County Forest Preserve District has begun the \$13 million renovation of the 259-acre Fort Sheridan Forest Preserve, which includes a golf course, trails and other amenities. The Army donated three parcels to the forest preserve from 1998 to 2001.

The transfer would occur pending expected approval in the Senate of the Department of Defense Authorization Bill and could be complete next year. Highland Park likely would annex the property, and the public portion would legally be owned by the environmental trust.

"Government can't do these things alone anymore," said Highland Park Mayor Michael Belsky.

The next step would be a \$125,000 survey to determine the park's boundaries. That cost would be picked up by the Openlands Project.

Eventually, ecologists and naturalists will study the area and make proposals for renovation. No estimate has been made of that cost, although it is expected to be an expensive undertaking, in part because of severe drainage problems that would need to be corrected.